

Centinela Valley adult school teacher finishes class in secret after cuts end program

By Rob Kuznia *The Daily Breeze* *Daily Breeze*

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Photo Gallery

It almost sounds like the story line of a made-for-TV movie.

When the Centinela Valley school district in Lawndale pulled the plug on adult education in March due to tough economic times, the students of a medical-assisting class - most of them low-income women trying to move up in life - were left in the lurch after several weeks of class.

Instead of accepting the loss, the newly unemployed teacher, Cristina Chiappe, and her students began meeting every day to finish what they started - at a secret location.

For Chiappe, who happens to be a Hawthorne school board member, the endeavor was a risky one.

Although she received a proper business license from Los Angeles County for the nonprofit school, her application for a permit from the city of Lawndale was denied due to inadequate parking.

Adamant about getting the students through, Chiappe held the class on the sly. She agreed to participate in this story on condition that the Daily Breeze not disclose the location of the classroom.

Pooling their resources, the students and teacher purchased \$15,000 worth of medical equipment, much of it on eBay. Chiappe then resumed her lectures. The class ended last week, and the group even put on a little cap-and-gown graduation ceremony.

Now, all 16 students are headed to externships in doctors offices and clinics throughout the South Bay and Harbor Area.

Chiappe doesn't consider her off-the-grid class an act of civil disobedience.

"I see it as doing what is right for this particular group of students," she said. "If I continue doing it, it will be bad, because I will be doing it on purpose, knowing the rules. But here I didn't know much about the rules ... which I respect very much."

One of the students, 22-year-old Lydia Cholico of Gardena, said the new class was a godsend after last year's abrupt cancellation.

"I was like, 'What am I going to do with my whole life?'" she said. "I don't want to work at Taco Bell for the rest of my life."

Next week, Cholico will report to a local clinic to begin racking up the 160 externship hours necessary to work as a certified medical assistant. The pay for a medical assistant position typically ranges from \$10 to \$18 an hour.

Also headed to a doctor's office to advance her career is 19-year-old Vanessa Romero, who works at a gas

station on the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

"I want to be a technician," she said. "I'm taking baby steps."

Initially, after the closure of the Centinela Valley program, the only other option for the students was enrolling at a for-profit school, where tuition typically runs upward of \$20,000. Chiappe, by contrast, asked students for a donation of \$1,600 - \$300 more than the tuition charged by the Centinela Valley school district, which reimbursed the students when the class was cut midstream.

Some students paid the full amount, others gave what they could, and still others were unable to offer anything.

Chiappe and her class built the plane as they flew. Over the course of the class, the items they ordered began arriving - the desks, the blue scrubs, an examining table, an electrocardiogram, a centrifuge, a bag of baby mannequins for CPR training.

Students for some reason were most excited about the arrival of the eerily realistic fake arm.

"With this arm we try to find the vein, so instead of doing it on ourselves, we do it on the dummy - on the arm," said student Diana Rivera.

The class was a team effort. Using a smartphone camera and a free computer program, the students themselves created the requisite ID badges for working an externship. (This administrative task was previously handled by the school district.)

The donations were used to cover rent - \$850 a month - as well as the professional-liability insurance. The students and teacher even took turns hauling out the trash.

Chiappe is careful to note that none of the donations went into her pocket. She paid her bills with unemployment benefits, as well as the proceeds from the sale of the home she shared with her husband. (They now rent.)

However, she hopes to be able to teach the class next year - providing she can find a space - and plans to use the student tuition to pay herself a modest salary. She is currently looking for a property.

"I really feel I'm doing what I love to do," Chiappe said. "I really love teaching. I know if I can touch even one life in the community - get one person to get a job - that brings so much happiness to me."

Through the years, Chiappe has developed a strong reputation in the local health-care community.

In the office of Dr. Henry Wu in Redondo Beach, Chiappe's externs often get hired on full-time to work as receptionists, medical assistants or medical billers. At one point, four of her former students were employed in the office at the same time.

Clinica Del Alma in Gardena has offered externships to Chiappe's students for years. Chiappe's current situation didn't stop the clinic's office manager from calling her last week seeking fresh externs.

"She's excellent, and the students we've taken from her would say she's great," said the clinic's office manager, Yvette Noriega, of Chiappe. "She's a sweet lady."

This isn't the first time Chiappe has taken a rather unconventional tack. Back in April, shortly after the Centinela Valley school board gutted the adult-education program, she staged a one-person protest at a public board meeting, arriving in a skeleton costume to lament a "bare-bones budget."

School officials in the Centinela Valley Union High School District say they will happily reinstate much of the adult-education program at a later date, should California voters approve one of two tax hike initiatives for schools on the Nov. 6 ballot.

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How to help

Cristina Chiappe is seeking a permanent location for her medical-assisting class. Anyone with pertinent information can call her at 310-901-3704.